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Opening Extract from...

HOW TO KEEP A SECRET

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“Do you ever wonder what your life would have been like if you’d married your first boyfriend?”

“I’d be divorced,” Helen said. “My first boyfriend was a total nightmare.”

They looked at Lauren and she felt her face heat. “Ed *was* my first real boyfriend.”

It wasn’t really a lie, she told herself. *Boyfriend* meant someone you had a relationship with. The word conjured up images of exploratory kisses, trips to the movies and awkward fumbling. A boyfriend was a public thing. *I’m going out with my boyfriend tonight.*

Using that definition, Ed had been her first boyfriend.

“You’ve been with one man your whole adult life? No flings? No crazy, naughty teenage sex?”

Lauren felt her heart pick up speed. *That didn’t count*, she told herself. “For me it’s always been Ed.”

“Well—” Helen spoke first. “I’m going to stop talking before I incriminate myself.”

“I auditioned a lot of men before finally awarding the role of my husband to Pete.” Ruth finished her croissant. “I’d better go. I left my house in chaos.” She reached for her bag. “See you at the party tonight, Lauren. Sure there’s nothing we can do?”

“No thanks, I’ve got it covered.”

“Is your sister coming over from the States?”

“No, she can’t get away from school right now.”

Lauren felt another stab of guilt. When they’d last spoken, Jenna had confessed that her period was late. Lauren had heard the excitement in her voice and felt excited with her. She knew how desperately Jenna wanted a baby and how upset her sister was each month when it didn’t happen. She’d intended to call, but party planning had driven it from her head.

“What about your mum? She’s not coming either?”

Lauren kept her smile in place. “No.”

Of course that had a lot to do with the fact that she hadn’t been invited.

Lauren had never had a close relationship with her mother, but things had been particularly strained last time she’d visited home. Her mother had seemed preoccupied and even more distant than usual.

When her father had died five years earlier, Lauren had expected Nancy to be devastated.

She’d flown home for the funeral and been humbled by how strong her mother was. Her father had been a much-loved member of the community and there had been plenty of people sobbing at his funeral. Her mother hadn’t been one of them. Nancy Stewart had stood with her back as straight as the mast of a ship, dry eyed, as if part of her was somewhere else. Lauren assumed she handled grief the way she handled everything else life threw her—by vanishing to her studio and losing herself in her painting.

Lauren stared into her coffee.

Growing up, her father had been the “fun” parent.

“Let’s go to the beach, girls,” he’d say, and scoop them up without giving a thought to what they were doing, He’d bring them back long past bedtime with sandy feet, burned

skin and salty hair. They were hungry and overtired and it was their mother who had dealt with the fallout.

Nancy would be waiting tight-lipped, the supper she'd prepared congealing on cold plates. She'd serve the ruined food in silence and then dunk both girls in the shower where Jenna would scream and howl as the water stung her burned flesh.

By the end of the summer the sun had bleached their hair almost white and freckles had exploded over Jenna's face. To Lauren they looked like sand sprinkled over her skin, but Jenna thought they looked liked dirt. She'd scrub at her skin until it was red and sore and the freckles merged.

"You could at least remember sunscreen," Nancy had said to Tom one night and Lauren had heard him laugh.

"I forgot. Loosen up."

It seemed to Lauren that the more her father told Nancy to loosen up, the tighter she was wound.

She'd long since given up wishing her relationship with her mother were different.

She and Ed returned to Martha's Vineyard for ten days every summer, but Lauren felt edgy the whole time. It was part of a life she'd left behind, and being there made her feel uncomfortable, as if she was dressing in old clothes that no longer fit. Not having her father there with his endless jokes and energy made the visit even more awkward.

The only good part about it was seeing her sister in person.

Lauren saw Helen stand up and realized she'd missed half the conversation.

Her friend reached for her bag. "Have your girls finished this wretched ancestry project? Martin's been wishing we'd picked a different school to send her to. One that doesn't take education so seriously."

Lauren grabbed her coat, too. "What ancestry project?"

Helen and Ruth exchanged looks.

"This is why we envy you," Ruth said. "Your Mack is so smart she does all these things without your help."

"Mack does tend to figure these things out on her own." All the same, she made a mental note to ask Mack about it, just to be sure.

"Everything okay with Mack?" Helen held the door open for them and they swapped warm, scented air for frozen winds. "No more trouble with those bitches from the year above?"

Lauren was tempted to mention the pink hair and the fact that something felt "off," but decided not to. She was still hoping it was nothing.

"Everything seems fine."

"Abigail hasn't mentioned anything, and she was the one who found that Facebook page when it happened." Ruth squeezed her arm. "I'm sure it's over and done."

She hoped so. She knew she had a tendency to blow things out of proportion. According to Ed, she catastrophized.

If he was right, then his words earlier should be nothing more than a throwaway comment.

If they had a problem, they would have talked about it.

She checked her phone and saw she was on time for her hair appointment. “I’ll see you both later.”

Ed was going to be fine and so was Mack. True, she was behaving oddly but the chances were it was nothing more than a phase.

It didn’t mean she was keeping secrets.

Lauren tried to ignore the voice in her head reminding her that she and her sister had kept secrets all the time.